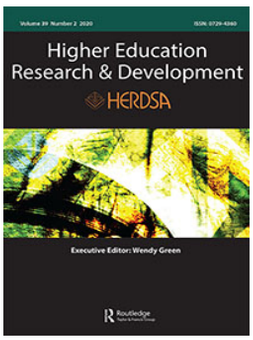

Higher Education Research & Development

ISSN: 0729-4360 (Print) 1469-8366 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cher20

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To cite this article: Jelle Mampaey, Vanja Schtemberg, Jos Schijns, Jeroen Huisman & Arild Wæraas (2020) Internal branding in higher education: dialectical tensions underlying the discursive legitimation of a new brand of student diversity, Higher Education Research & Development, 39:2, 230-243, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2019.1674252

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1674252

Published online: 17 Oct 2019.

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
2020, VOL. 39, NO. 2, 230–243
https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1674252

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Internal branding in higher education: dialectical tensions underlying the discursive legitimation of a new brand of student diversity

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ABSTRACT

Most studies on branding in higher education focus on external branding or image-building towards external stakeholders such as students. Internal branding is an underexplored topic, even though it should be considered as important as external branding. Internal branding is about achieving the necessary internal support for the external brand. Drawing on the theoretical concept of discursive legitimation, we explore the strategies that contribute to an internally supported new brand with student diversity as brand value. We conducted a case study of a Flemish university college that has (largely) succeeded in achieving internal support for its new external brand of student diversity. Analyzing the case from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, we specifically zoomed in on the dialectical tensions underlying the discursive legitimation of this new brand. We identified three specific tensions, which illustrate the inherent complexity of the internal branding process: authorization as (dis)empowerment, normalization as (dis)empowerment and moralization as (dis)empowerment.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 May 2018
Accepted 11 May 2019

Introduction

In the context of ever-increasing national and international competition, higher education institutions are pressured to engage with branding (Chapleo, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) and higher education scholars increasingly pay attention to this phenomenon (for example, Aspara, Aula, Tienari, & Tikkanen, 2014; Aula, Tienari, & Wæraas, 2015; Mampaey, Huisman, & Seeber, 2015). In the context of higher education, a brand represents the totality of perceptions and feelings that stakeholders associate with a particular higher education institution (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett, & Savani, 2009). Branding is about image building towards specific target groups, and ideally, institutions want to stand out and build an emotional connection with these groups (Karens, Eshuis, Klijn, & Voets, 2016). It is generally argued that it is increasingly important for universities to

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develop and articulate a unique, clear and coherent brand that responds to the needs of specific target groups.

A large number of studies have investigated various aspects of branding (for example, Aspara et al., 2014; Aula et al., 2015; Mampaey, & Huisman, 2016; Mampaey, Huisman, & Seeber, 2015), but the studies mainly focus on *external branding* oriented towards students (as a key group of 'stakeholders'). Aula et al. (2015) also argue that the bulk of research on university branding treats branding as marketing activities towards students. Universities (and other higher education institutions) have other stakeholders or groups they need to communicate with (for example, academic and administrative staff, funding bodies, boards of trustees, private donors, national and local government agencies, the media, alumni) but in many studies, students are considered as the most important stakeholder group (for example, Ali-Choudhury et al., 2009; Chapleo & Clark, 2016). Studies confirm that a university brand has become a crucial element in student decision-making (Balaji, Roy, & Sadeque, 2016; Teh & Salleh, 2011). Accordingly, external branding has become a strategic managerial issue in higher education (Stensaker, 2007).

In contrast, *internal branding* towards organizational insiders is largely underexplored, although some exceptions can be identified (for example, Judson, Aurand, Gorchels, & Gordon, 2008; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Aula et al. (2015) do however claim that university branding is a fundamental internal question of organizational purpose. Following this line of reasoning and based on the broader literature on corporate branding (Hatch & Schultz, 2003), we argue that a shared stance towards the brand among insiders is necessary for sustainable external branding. Without this internal support, external branding activities run the risk of only consisting of unsupported (and therefore meaningless) communication or even being resisted by a large part of the insiders (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001; Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2005).

Early attempts to explore internal university branding have demonstrated that the management of internal commitment to the external brand is highly problematic, despite – paradoxically – it being a prerequisite for meaningful external branding (for example, Baker & Balmer, 1997; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). In line with the growing literature, we suggest that internal branding should be of great interest for scholars interested in university branding and more broadly in branding in the not-for-profit sector. But given the limited amount of studies, there is a dearth of insight in organizational strategies that enhance insiders' alignment with the external university brand (for an exception, see Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2011). Our first objective is, therefore, to explore strategies for internal branding. As we will explain in our theoretical framework, we do not however approach internal branding from a normative perspective prescribing which strategies universities *should* implement to convince organizational insiders. Quite on the contrary, we aim to demonstrate complexity by focusing on dialectical tensions underlying the internal branding process.

In addition to the lack of understanding of strategies for internal branding, there is a related challenge regarding the dominant, one-sided perspective on university branding. Most studies draw from a rationalistic perspective emphasizing top-down implementation of university brands, in line with the broader perspective in the literature on strategic change in higher education (for example, Lillis & Lynch, 2014; Machado, Farhangmehr, & Taylor, 2004). Our second objective is to introduce an alternative perspective that emphasizes a combination of top-down and bottom-up processes underlying strategic change in higher education, and university branding in particular (see also Bleiklie, Enders, & Lepori, 2017).

Finally, previous studies show that two values, 'excellence' or 'diversity', seem to dominate marketing and branding campaigns in higher education around the globe, especially in Europe and the United States (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010; Tienari, Aula, & Aarrevaara, 2016; Urciuoli, 2003; Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005). Whereas diversity is increasingly selected as an external brand, it is unclear how universities achieve internal support for this specific brand. Diversity refers to student diversity or the presence of students from diverse social, ethnic and/or racial background (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015). However, attempts to develop an external brand of student diversity are often confronted with internal resistance, in that student diversity is widely constructed as contradicting with educational excellence (Mampaey, 2017; Shaw, 2009). On the one hand, contemporary universities are expected to pursue the value of educational excellence (with connotations of selective admission) and on the other hand they are expected to value student diversity (with connotations of open access). A reputation of high selectivity often implies low reputation of student diversity and vice versa (Seeber, Barberio, Huisman, & Mampaey, 2017). Hence, a third objective of this study is to investigate to what extent universities have achieved insider support for an external brand of student diversity, in spite of the perceived contradiction with educational excellence. The main research question is: To what extent is the brand value of student diversity instilled in organizational members, and how do these members discursively legitimize this value? In the following section, we present our theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Internal branding

The literature on internal branding of organizations in general and higher education institutions in particular is sparse. However, it is generally acknowledged that branding begins from within organizations (Judson et al., 2008). The concept refers to 'the activities employed by a company to ensure intellectual and emotional staff buy-in … into not only the corporate culture, but also the specific brand personality invoked within this culture' (Mahnert & Torres, 2007, p. 55). The purpose is to convince employees of the value of the brand so that they, in turn, can convince external stakeholders of the same. An important underlying idea is that employees are unlikely to convince others of something that they do not believe themselves. The ultimate goal, therefore, is to turn employees into 'brand ambassadors' who 'live the brand' (Ind, 2001) and enact key brand characteristics in their daily communication and behavior. This is done by managing employees' experiences with and perceptions of their own organization, reflecting the view that 'people, not advertising … are at the core of a brand' (Bergstrom, Blumenthal, & Crothers, 2002, p. 135). If successful, internal branding increases employees' degree of identification with and commitment to the brand, leading each employee to consistently reproduce the desired brand values.

Convincing employees about a certain brand value or a selected interpretation of the brand, however, can be very challenging. Employees are likely to have very different conceptualizations of their organization. This problem is even more significant in higher education because faculty members tend to consider themselves independent, expecting a certain amount of freedom to pursue their own activities regardless of

any official university brand (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). As a result, in contrast to dominant perspectives in organization science (for example, Rekettye & Pozsgai, 2015), we do not conceive of successful internal branding as a set of managerial activities to create and internally communicate the differentiating features of the university. Successful internal branding is – we argue – to a large extent a collective set of discursive legitimations of the external brand, legitimations that are not necessarily conscious or planned. It is the ongoing, collective activity of internal positive sense-making of the external brand that enhances internal commitment to the brand. Our approach is in line with other insights in organization science, where it has indeed been acknowledged that organizational management is more attuned to 'soft control' for example, through identity regulation (for example, Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) instead of 'hard control' for example, through performance measurement systems. We acknowledge the role of top-down processes, for example, the introduction of a new external brand by university managers, but we also emphasize the crucial role of the ongoing internal legitimation of the external brand by managers and other organizational actors. Without internal legitimation, an external brand will only consist of unsupported external communications by university managers, communications that are 'decoupled' from the actual internal activities of academic staff (see also Mampaey, 2017). Such an external brand will fail to make universities live up to their brand promises.

Discursive legitimation and dialectical tensions

So how can we conceptualize this internal legitimation of the external brand? For this purpose, we draw on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an established cross-disciplinary approach to the linguistic analysis of social phenomena (Fairclough, 2005). It is a theory and methodology that examines the role played by language in the construction of social reality. There are different, more specific, theoretical approaches of CDA, of which we apply the so-called discursive legitimation approach (Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006). Discursive legitimation is about creating a sense of positive or acceptable action in a specific setting through language. Discursive legitimation implies that managers and other organizational actors try to convince other insiders through various kinds of rhetorical moves. In this rhetoric, particular actions and intentions are portrayed as positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable or necessary while others are constructed as negative, harmful, intolerable or morally reprehensible. Previous studies show that discursively established legitimacy is a central part of identity construction and of stakeholder formation and management in organizational settings (Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). In our study, it is assumed that discursive legitimation plays a crucial role in establishing internal legitimacy for a new brand.

Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) have developed a grammar of legitimation consisting of four specific ways in which language functions and is used for the construction of legitimacy. These strategies are not always intentional or conscious (Vaara et al., 2006). Their four discursive legitimation strategies are authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, mythopoesis.

1. Authorization: legitimation by referring to the authority of tradition, custom, law and persons.

2. Rationalization: legitimation by referring to the utility of specific actions based on knowledge claims that are accepted as relevant in a given context.
3. Moral evaluation: legitimation by referring to specific value systems that provide the moral basis for legitimation.
4. Mythopoesis: legitimation through telling stories or constructing narrative structures to indicate how the issue in question relates to the past or the future.

Other research offers new categories to this grammar of legitimation. A new main category is proposed by Vaara et al. (2006): normalization or legitimation by rendering specific actions or phenomena 'normal' or 'natural'. Especially relevant for our research is that Vaara et al. (2006) also emphasize the dialectical tensions that are interconnected with legitimation processes. Normalization implies rendering specific actions or phenomena 'normal', which also implies that other actions or phenomena are turned into something 'abnormal'. Analogously, authorization implies granting authority to some phenomena or persons, while marginalizing others. Rationalization is then related to the prioritization of some rationalities and the marginalization of others. Through moral evaluation, organizations put emphasis on specific moral values and related ideologies, while neglecting others. Finally, legitimation through mythopoesis prioritizes specific narratives and means disinterest in others. Accordingly, this implies that every attempt to establish internal legitimacy of a new brand could be related to processes of empowerment of some phenomena (and/or persons) and disempowerment of others. From a CDA-perspective, a perfect world without tensions is a utopia. In organizational restructurings, including the implementation of a new external brand, there are always winners and losers.

With this framework in mind we explore the discursive legitimation strategies that are deployed by organizational insiders to legitimize a new brand with student diversity as brand value, as well as the dialectical tensions associated with these strategies. Student diversity as brand value may on the one hand be seen as a lucrative choice given the ever-increasing student diversity due to the massification of higher education (for example, Teichler, 1998), but also a risky choice given the perceived contradiction between student diversity and educational excellence (see introduction). Hence, this choice definitely requires internal legitimation.

Research design

The research design is a single-case study (Yin, 2017). We explicitly searched for a case that underwent a rebranding process and we contacted some colleagues in our informal network in Flemish higher education, who could help us with our quest. One of our colleagues referred to a university college as an important outlier, because of its recent, explicit commitment to student diversity. Accordingly, our case study was conducted in a Flemish higher education institution (from now referred to as College for Diversity, or CfD, a fictional name to anonymize the case). CfD is one of Flanders' largest university colleges with around 13,000 students and 1300 employees. They offer different bachelor study programs, mainly in the humanities. They also offer post-graduate programes and courses.

The case study is particularly relevant for our contact at the institution pointed out that CfD was deemed relatively successful in achieving a change towards a brand of student

diversity and related values such as inclusiveness, equity and social justice. It is important to add that regarding the composition of the student body, the college is not an extreme case. That is, although the university college has a fair share of students that qualify for a full study grant (we use this as a proxy for the share of students from either a lower socio-economic background or an ethnic minority background), it is not the most diverse university college. In the past decade or so, the college often figured in the top-5 of least diverse university colleges. Given this (relatively) low level of diversity, the university college could be tempted to brand itself primarily through messages related to the 'excellence' narrative. On the contrary, the university college adopted a mission and vision based on inclusion. The inclusive mission means that the higher education institution explicitly aims to enhance the educational attainment of non-traditional students (for example, lower social class students, ethnic minority students, disabled students). The university college is one of the few in the Flemish system that clearly demarcates its attention to excellence *and* diversity. Whereas most university colleges implicitly (or not at all) refer to student diversity, in CfD's vision statement we read: 'Based on its aspiration towards excellence, CfD will offer chances to every talent to maximally develop his/her talents, irrespective potentially limiting factors like language, gender, functional impairments, age, socio-economic status or a specific ethnic-cultural background' (website).

According to our main contact person at CfD, a central administrator, the development of the diversity strategy dates back 12–15 years. The year 2005 is an important milestone, for all Flemish universities and university colleges signed a declaration of intent regarding student diversity. Hence, this declaration is a regional one. Key activities that were taken up in subsequent years are, for example, supporting students in their study choice, working with role models, language and individual coaching, and a forum on diversity. It looks like the diversity strategy is largely institutionalized over the years. The 2015 annual report confirms the continued attention to diversity and reiterates the objective to use its didactical expertise and personal coaching approach to remove potential barriers and to nurture every talent and the latest strategic plan also confirms attention to diversity offering a surplus value and its continued investments in an accessible learning environment and differentiation in teaching and evaluation.

In conceptual terms, CfD is therefore an interesting case, for there was no immediate need to change the brand. But, as argued by our main contact person, the university college embarked on a journey to put student diversity much more central in its activities and strategies. The journey could be considered as risky, for the brand change could lead to considerable resistance from those that adhered to or felt comfortable with the initial brand of excellence. The brand change is especially risky in the context of Flemish education, where the perceived contradiction between excellence and student diversity is extremely salient (Mampaey, 2017).

We used the theoretical framework and our coding scheme to categorize and make sense of the internal branding of student diversity based on eleven in-depth interviews, which appeared to be sufficient to achieve data saturation. The case study consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews about CfD's diversity vision and policy with eleven insiders. In-depth interviews are useful to collect detailed data about a person's thoughts and behaviors or to explore new issues in depth. The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys and document analysis. An interview

protocol was developed in which student diversity was the central theme. The main topics discussed in the interviews were: the interviewee's view on student and staff diversity and how this relates to the views and policies within the organization, potential staff resistance to the value of student diversity and how CfD deals with this resistance. The prone to bias, which is a pitfall in in-depth interviews, is minimalized by choosing interviewees with different backgrounds and different positions in the organization (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The interviewees are either active in the central services and policies (5), or as faculty members (teachers/coaches) in different programs (6). All interviewed insiders were highly experienced organizational insiders (at least five years of experience in the university college). Because we conceive of internal branding as a collective set of discursive legitimations (not necessarily conscious or planned) by managers and other organizational members, we thought it important not only to zoom in on managerial discursive legitimations of the external brand, but rather on the collective sense-making of managers and other insiders at different levels. We explicitly selected experienced organizational insiders as our interviewees, to guarantee that they effectively engage with this collective sense-making. By asking questions concerning the diversity policy of CfD in semi-structured interviews, we implicitly induced organizational members' discursive legitimations of the external brand. One interview was conducted with each respondent, lasting 60–90 min. The interviews were conducted by the second author. None of the authors is affiliated with the CfD, allowing a thorough, critical analysis. We guaranteed anonymity to all interviewees, which also implies that we cannot link quotes to specific profiles of staff members in the findings section. Interviewees were conducted in Dutch, the mother tongue of all respondents and the interviewer. Quotes were translated in the very last phase of the writing process, to avoid translation issues as much as possible.

Data were analyzed through the lens of CDA. In the first step, the first author coded the different discursive legitimation strategies in all interviews (qualitative content analysis). Each utterance was considered as a potential discursive legitimation. We identified three types of discursive legitimation that occurred in most interviews: authorization, normalization and moral evaluation. The second author controlled the coding process and this was discussed until consensus was reached. In the second step, the second author coded and interpreted the dialectical tensions underlying these discursive legitimation strategies from a CDA perspective, with particular attention to the (dis)empowerment of phenomena and/or persons involved. Interpretations were discussed with the other co-authors until consensus was reached.

Findings

First of all, we found that internal branding could be typified as relatively successful in that all interviewees reported a shared stance towards the (new) external brand of student diversity. None of the interviewees mentioned instances of insider resistance to the external brand, neither from staff members nor from students. However, zooming in on the rebranding process from a CDA-perspective, we could also identify dialectical tensions between empowerment and disempowerment, in line with our theoretical framework. We will now illustrate these discursive legitimations and dialectical tensions in more detail.

Authorization as (dis)empowerment

The legitimation strategy of authorization – by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law and persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested – was one of the discursive strategies underlying the legitimation of the new brand of student diversity, a strategy that could be identified in all interviews. With this strategy, student diversity was legitimized by referring to some kind of authority. In this way, organizational insiders experienced some kind of obligation to support the new brand of student diversity.

Impersonal authority was a dominant theme in most interviews. In some utterances, reference was made to the impersonal authority of official policies of the university college that enforce employee compliance with the new external brand. The impersonal authority of official policies was strengthened by referring to the political context in which these official policies are embedded:

> In 2005, we have – like all other higher education institutions – agreed to formally engage ourselves with diversity and we were one of the first university colleges to sign that agreement. That agreement formed the broader context in which the developments within CfD took place. We asked ourselves how – within that context – we should start.

These types of discursive legitimation could be related to power dynamics. By stressing the authority of official policies that are driven by macro-level policy processes, the new diversity policy is empowered as well as politicians, (top) management and central administration responsible for this policy. At the same time, employees at the faculty level are disempowered in that they have no choice but to comply with these broader forces. Official policies are consistently constructed as important frameworks for the employees, which was noticeable in our interviews with faculty members. By making such statements, the agency of employees is downplayed. In some utterances, this disempowerment is formulated quite explicitly. For instance:

> I think the director of studies really has the authority in this matter […] That implies that the diversity policy needs to be implemented, period. A lecturer is not supposed to question this. The student is entitled to benefit from that policy […] For us, this then really is a contractual agreement, which we signed off […] Decisions are decisions, that is our framework.

> We steer a lot from the central administration […] If we were to grant the study programmes more autonomy, this would undermine the charisma of our university college.

Interestingly, the authority of official policies is in itself uncontested. It seems that in CfD, official policies are widely supported. In all interviews, the authority of official policies is in itself legitimated by referring to CfD's internal communication strategy and organizational structure with forums through which employees and students are being involved in the development of new policies. The discursive legitimation strategy is nicely captured by the following excerpt:

> Co-creation is a central value in our institutional plan. […] Policies have been agreed upon democratically and therefore, they need to be followed by all employees.

Hence, it could be argued that the co-creation of official policies is a material context that makes the authority of these policies more convincing. Here, we do, however, identify a contradiction between democratic and authoritarian aspects of the rebranding process in

that the new diversity policy is authorized by referring to democratic policy development. This also implies that employees and other stakeholders are empowered in phases of policy development, but somewhat disempowered once the policies are actually implemented, for at that stage the room for maneuver is restricted. Accordingly, selective stakeholder empowerment might be a better concept to describe the principle underlying the co-creation of official policies.

Normalization as (dis)empowerment

With regard to normalization, student diversity was in most interviews constructed as a normal reality. Some examples:

> Our society is diverse, the pupils that our new teachers will teach are diverse, our education is diverse.

> Diversity is reality and it should not be a problem at all.

> Diversity is our base.

> In present times and in present society there is no other option, diversity is normal and also necessary for internationalization.

The overall legitimation strategy is here: student diversity is a normal. Accordingly, it is also normalized that organizational insiders respect the value of student diversity. At first glance, this discursive strategy may be applauded in that student diversity seems to be fully embraced. Student diversity is constructed as a taken-for-granted reality in CfD, as a phenomenon that is normal or natural. In this way, it seems that a diverse range of non-traditional students is empowered, in contrast to the global disempowerment of these students, who are still underrepresented in higher education. However, from the critical perspective of CDA, we could also observe selective normalization. That is, inclusion of specific segments of the non-traditional student population was normalized, as well as the exclusion of other segments. Student diversity is defined very broadly, in fact any type of difference could be labeled as student diversity, which also implies that a focus on, for example, racial/ethnic diversity is not necessarily required:

> To us, diversity points at the theme of differences … in age, gender, intellectual capabilities, talents, whatever […] In that regard, we look at diversity in a generic way … differences in learning styles, differences in terms of financial opportunities […] We already have a super-diverse university college. We have students relying on grants, we have students with functional impairments. Admitted, we do not have many students with an ethnic background.

In other words, respondents seem to cherry-pick among the multiple dimensions of student diversity, selecting these dimensions that are experienced to be manageable or affordable:

> We had a discussion about the preparatory tracks of non-Dutch speaking students. We decided not to develop these, for we simply do not have the resources. We have more than 10,000 students. If we would have abundant resources, we would cooperate. So we do consider the options.

Such an approach to diversity enables a discourse of selectivity with regards to the dimensions of student diversity that are targeted:

> I think that we particularly focus on the social, cultural and economic barriers. Also disabilities and impairments are target areas, and actually also students that combine work and study and therefore do not study full-time.

In this way, a diverse range of non-traditional students is empowered, but at the same time, some segments are disempowered, for instance students that are perceived to lack talent:

> Each talent needs coaching […] At entry, we try to advise students properly, for instance if we think that embarking on a Bachelor's programme is actually too ambitious.

Hence, in CfD, there is openness towards a diverse range of students, provided that they are perceived to be talented. The risk of this selective approach is that the most vulnerable segments of the student population (for example, low class, ethnic minority students) are excluded, disempowering them. Evidence of this interpretation could be found in the fact that some vulnerable segments of the student population are indeed underrepresented at CfD, which is also emphasized in some interviews in which it is stated that CFD is still a 'white' university college.

Moral evaluation as (dis)empowerment

Moral evaluation was also identified in most interviews, by referring to the fit between the new external brand and universal values. With regards to the reference to universal values, we identified statements such as:

> Everyone has the right to go to school.

> We believe in equal opportunities for everyone.

> As a higher education institution this is the right thing to do … we exist because of students.

In many utterances, it was argued that staff and the student body should be a reflection of society and that the institution has to embrace contemporary social developments. In sum, the legitimation strategy is as follows: because of universal values and the evolving society, establishing student diversity is the right thing to do. At first glance, this moral stance towards student diversity could again be applauded. But we also found an emphasis on more selective rights, disempowering certain segments of the non-traditional student population. For instance:

> Each capable and motivated student should have the right to register for higher education.

Rights are formulated quite restrictively, based on an ideology emphasizing rights in function of merit. Also, the rights that are emphasized are applicable at the level of enrollment in higher education, which reflects a discourse of equal opportunities, or equal rights at the entrance. At the exit, equal rights are not emphasized. Even more, in some interviews it was explicitly acknowledged that much more student diversity could be witnessed at the entrance, compared to the exit.

Discussion

The main question for this study was: To what extent is the brand value of student diversity instilled in organizational members, and how do these members discursively

legitimize this value? To address this research question, a case study was used based on interviews that were coded by drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, more specifically, the discursive legitimation approach (Vaara et al., 2006). We chose a case study in which legitimacy problems could be expected, for the seemingly more acceptable 'excellence' strategy was not chosen, but the more controversial strategy of 'student diversity'.

Despite the inherent potential for such problems in our case, the findings suggest that the internal branding process of creating intellectual and emotional 'buy-in' has instilled sufficient motivation in the informants to explicitly justify diversity as a brand value to outsiders. This study demonstrated that three of the five main categories of discursive legitimation were used to internally legitimize a new brand of student diversity. Overall, these findings make explicit that authorization, normalization and moral evaluation are the main discursive legitimation strategies used to internally legitimize student diversity as a brand value at a university college, where student diversity is an external brand, stressing again that there was no urgent necessity for the brand change. It appears that through a communication approach that addresses ideas of authority, normality and morality, a general internal acceptance of a new and risky brand is achieved. At the same time, dialectical tensions could be identified. That is, all discursive legitimation strategies were interconnected with processes of empowerment and disempowerment.

Authorization is legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law and persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested. This strategy is interconnected with the empowerment of official institutional policies, (top) management and central administration. At the same time, we could observe empowerment of stakeholders in phases of policy development through organizational structures of co-creation, but disempowerment in later phases. Organizational structures of co-creation seemed to facilitate the acceptance of authoritarian organizational policies. The 'bright side' of co-creation points at democratic stakeholder involvement, but our study illustrates that co-creation could also be related to a 'dark side' (see also Heidenreich, Wittkowski, Handrich, & Falk, 2015). That is, democratic processes in stages of policy development legitimate authoritarian organizational policies in later stages. Our study contributes to this literature by demonstrating that organizational structures of co-creation could eventually legitimate the oppression of skepticism towards implemented organizational policies.

Normalization implied selective normalization of specific dimensions of student diversity that are experienced to be most manageable, disempowering segments of the non-traditional student population that are perceived to be unmanageable. Our study confirms earlier research from the perspective of Critical Race Theory (for example, Patton, 2016), a theoretical paradigm that emphasizes the problematic nature of diversity discourses. A 'colorblind' diversity policy (Wang, Castro, & Cunningham, 2014) could be identified in our case, which implies that the dimension of racial/ethnic diversity is overlooked. Our empirical study clearly demonstrates the pragmatic ambiguity (Giroux, 2006) of the concept of student diversity, defined as the condition of admitting more than one course of action. Specifically, (student) diversity is a concept that could be interpreted in many ways so that every institution could be labeled as diverse. For that matter, even a traditional, elite and White student population could be constructed as diverse based on gender, sexual preferences, etc.

Analogously, moral evaluation was interconnected with the moralization of selective rights, for example, only for those students who are talented and/or motivated, reflecting

meritocratic ideology (Liu, 2011). Both selective normalization and moralization may be very common legitimation strategies in higher education systems in which marketization is taken for granted. In such systems, institutions are even pressured to focus on specific segments of the student population or so-called 'niches', where it is also perfectly legitimate not to focus on other segments (Mampaey, Huisman, & Seeber, 2015).

Based on earlier research, it seemed that two discourses of 'excellence' and 'diversity' dominate marketing and branding campaigns in higher education (Urciuoli, 2003). As described above, earlier research also suggests that the choice for diversity as university brand is a risky strategy, because of the broadly accepted association with lower quality. Our research indicated that this tension is managed by merging these two concepts. This could, for instance, be observed in the selection of specific dimensions of student diversity that do not conflict with the discourse of excellence, or the emphasis on rights that are selectively attributed to a diverse *but talented* range of students. In the specific Flemish context, earlier research has demonstrated that racial / ethnic minority students are widely perceived as lacking talent and the inclusion of these students induces legitimation struggles in educational settings (Mampaey & Zanoni, 2014; Zanoni & Mampaey, 2013). We could observe that CfD managed this tension (un)consciously by avoiding the dimension of racial/ethnic diversity. In sum, the process of internal legitimation is an ongoing process characterized by discursive struggles (Joutsenvirta, 2011). Organizational transitions can never be characterized as smooth processes but always involve power, including possible power abuses with winners and losers.

An important limitation is that our study was explorative. Further research could zoom in on specific aspects of internal branding that were identified in our study, with a focus on insiders' discursive legitimation of student diversity (or other values/priorities/strategies) vis-a-vis other organizational insiders. It would also be relevant to further explore the link between organizational structures and internal branding. Another relevant topic for further research includes the evolution of the discursive legitimation strategies over time.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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